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ABSTRACT

The Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the White House Conference on Indian Education suggested systemic reforms that would improve the education of Native students who attend public schools. These reforms focus on fostering intercultural harmony in schools, improving teacher preparation, developing instructional curricula and strategies that support diverse cultural needs and learning styles, including American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) parents in the education process, and adopting a new paradigm for evaluation of AI/AN student progress and success. Proven practices that establish intercultural harmony in schools include developing positive self-regard in students; increasing intergroup contact under specified conditions; introducing in-depth multicultural activities at an early age; and engaging in activities that replace inaccurate information, negative attitudes, and discriminatory behavior. Non-Native educators need in-depth, sustained multicultural training to prepare for teaching culturally diverse student populations. A culturally relevant curriculum takes into account the interests and needs of AI/AN students and their learning strengths for visual, perceptual, and spatial information. Schools must make special efforts to include AI/AN parents, as this often improves student attitudes as well as achievement and behavior. Finally, more authentic indicators of learning, such as criterion-referenced tests or portfolios of student progress, are needed to measure AI/AN educational progress. (KS)

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BLUEPRINTS FOR INDIAN EDUCATION: IMPROVING MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Blueprints for Indian Education: Improving Mainstream Schooling

by Robin A. Butterfield

ERIC DIGEST

THERE ARE BETWEEN 300,000 and 400,000 American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children of school age. Of these children, between 85 and 90 percent are educated in public schools (Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1991). This Digest focuses on findings of the U.S. Department of Education's Indian Nations At Risk (INAR) Task Force (1991) and the White House Conference on Indian Education (1992) related to Native students who attend public schools. Task Force and Conference findings—produced in early 1991 and 1992, respectively—suggest systemic reforms that would (a) foster intercultural harmony in schools, (b) improve teacher preparation, (c) develop instructional curricula and strategies that support diverse cultural needs and learning styles, (d) include AI/AN parents in the educational process, and (e) adopt a new paradigm for evaluation of AI/AN student progress and success. The needs of AI/AN children with special needs or those who are talented and gifted will not be addressed here.

Fostering Intercultural Harmony

The growth in numbers of AI/AN people in urban areas is nearly double the rate of population growth in rural areas. In urban settings, desegregation requirements have hurt Native students by scattering them across large districts into many school buildings, increasing their isolation from their peers, and making it costly and difficult to provide effective cultural programs and support services. Because Native students learn best when there is a "critical mass" together in one site, they should be brought together in schools of choice, such as Native magnet schools (Charleston & King, 1991).

In addition to experiencing isolation, AI/AN students experience racism on both personal and institutional levels. The INAR hearings, held across the U.S., captured Native concerns about many interracial, interethnic, and intercultural impediments (Charleston & King, 1991):

- Native students frequently get categorized and treated as remedial students, thus lowering teacher expectations and increasing the risk of failure.
- Students who identify themselves as Natives often are subjected to taunts and racial slurs that make them feel threatened and ashamed. When they defend themselves against harassment, they often are suspended or expelled. Alienation is a key contributing factor in the high dropout rates.
- Schools resist integrating Native language and culture into the curriculum, even when excellent materials and resources are available.
- Schools and districts (especially small and rural) often constitute power bases in which there is active resistance to shared decision making with Native parents and tribes.
- Continued use of Native people as mascots, official symbols, emblems, and namesakes for schools is offensive and demeaning, and perpetuates negative racial stereotypes.

Research has revealed a number of practices that have proven effective in establishing intercultural harmony in schools (Cotton, 1994):

- Develop positive self-regard, which in turn encourages positive regard for those who are culturally different. Self-esteem-building activities referenced in the research include (a) receiving teacher warmth and encouragement, (b) experiencing academic success, (c) working closely with people who have physical or mental handicaps, (d) participating in positive activities portraying people of one's cultural group or gender, and (e) having teachers and administrators of one's cultural group in one's school.
- Increase intergroup contact under conditions in which students (a) have equal status, (b) get to know one another as individuals, (c) have common interests and similar characteristics, (d) associate with one another according to equitable social norms set by leaders, (e) have an interest in cooperation, and (f) can advance individual or group goals through crosscultural interaction. In addition, intercultural contact among students is beneficial (a) when it is extracurricular and social as well as academic, and (b) when it is frequent and sustained.
- Organize students into culturally heterogeneous cooperative learning teams, giving them tasks requiring group cooperation and interdependence, and structuring activities so that teams can experience success.
- Introduce all children early to in-depth, long-term, and high-quality multicultural activities infused across the curriculum to build intercultural understanding.
- Replace inaccurate information, negative attitudes, and discriminatory behavior by (a) dramatizing the unfairness of prejudice and the harm it causes, (b) using materials that portray cultural groups in a positive light, (c) focusing initially on one's own culture, (d) participating in role-plays and simulation games, and (e) counterstereotyping.
- Develop critical thinking skills to help students address common fallacies in reasoning such as overgeneralization and failure to follow a line of reasoning through to its logical conclusion.

Improving Teacher Preparation

The recruitment and retention of AI/AN administrators and teachers is difficult for mainstream schools, but role models for students are desperately needed. Since the number of Native educators remains inadequate, non-Native personnel need training to work more effectively with increasingly diverse student populations. Research on preparing teachers to teach culturally diverse student populations successfully shows a high correlation between educators' sensitivity, knowledge, and application of cultural awareness information and students' successful academic performance. Brief and superficial training may increase teacher knowledge, but has little or no effect on attitudes or behavior (Sleeter, 1990). In-depth, sustained multicultural training leads to the development of atti-

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tudes and skills needed to work with culturally diverse groups in general and AI/AN students in particular.

Teacher preparation programs should help non-Native teachers become aware of the lifeways and world views of AI/AN people by developing appreciation of Native history, language, culture, and spiritual values. Repeated practice, peer coaching, and continuing administrative support help sustain change efforts systemwide.

Developing Instructional Curricula and Strategies

There is considerable evidence that the learning styles of some AI/AN students differ from non-Native students. Many AI/AN students show strengths in visual, perceptual, or spatial information as opposed to information presented verbally and frequently use mental images rather than word associations. AI/AN students need to engage in learning relevant to their interests and changing needs that will help them understand what it means to live in a contemporary world.

Practices most consistent with how Native students learn mathematics and science best include (a) simultaneous processing (seeing the whole picture) instead of successive processing (analyzing information sequentially), (b) instruction that builds on AI/AN strengths as learners, (c) using hands-on materials or manipulatives, and (d) structuring classrooms to support cooperative learning (Preston, 1991).

Models have been developed to help teachers improve in many of these areas: (a) REACH (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage) or the Portland Public Schools' American Indian Baseline Essays help teachers integrate culture throughout the curriculum (Webb, 1990), and (b) Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) (Kerman, Kimball, & Martin, 1980) and Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA) (Graysol & Martin, 1990) help teachers become more aware of how their interactions with students determine students' levels of participation.

Including AI/AN Parents

The inclusion of AI/AN parents in mainstream schools improves parental attitudes and behaviors as well as student achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and behavior (Butterfield & Pepper, 1991). Overcoming historical barriers for AI/AN parents requires the commitment of all district and school staff. Special efforts should be targeted at parents of middle-school-age students since this is a critical and vulnerable time when students are making key life decisions.

To do this, schools need to provide (a) ongoing staff development to improve communication patterns with AI/AN parents; (b) a variety of parent education opportunities that address changing needs as students progress through the grades, including, when possible, instruction in traditional values and child-rearing practices; and (c) ongoing outreach to AI/AN parents that focuses on positive contacts with homes, rather than crisis intervention.

Adopting a New Paradigm for Evaluation

The public education system's reliance on standardized achievement tests may hinder AI/AN students because (a) students whose language background is non- or substandard English may read or interpret tests incorrectly and (b) AI/AN students' cultural values may discourage competitive behaviors, which can put these students at a disadvantage. Many current assessment methods are unresponsive to both Native and non-Native students (Nichols, 1991).

More authentic indicators of learning are needed to measure AI/AN educational progress. The term "authentic work" describes tasks that students consider meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one's efforts. By this standard, students master essential tasks instead of recalling basic facts. This style of learning is well suited to many tribal groups that respect an individual's ability to learn from experience, without constant supervision and correction (Nichols, 1991).

The Bureau of Indian Affairs' (1988) Effective Schools Team (BEST) initiative has developed measures that could serve as systemic indicators in the evaluation of Native education in mainstream schools: (a) criterion-referenced tests (teacher-made tests); (b) portfolios of student progress, such as writing samples; (c) extracurricular participation rates and increases in the variety of such activities; (d) increased attendance and graduation rates; (e) decreased vandalism rates; (f) increased ability of a school to keep students and staff; (g) implementation of new curriculum initiatives; (h) increased participation by parents and community members; and (i) staff development and facilities improvement.

Conclusion

The recommendations identified here require schoolwide reform in many cases, yet reform should not be viewed as the end product of any particular approach. Rather, reform should be viewed as the constant enabling of change, development, or enhancement. In school districts with Native learners, broad-based change, though initiated in the interests of Native learners, should have positive effects on the ability of these systems to define and respond to the needs of all local constituents (Beaulieu, 1991).

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